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Defense or Debacle: The Great Missile Debate

MX: Prescription for Disaster. By Herbert Scoville Jr. MIT Press. 231 pp. \$15; paperback, \$6.95

By **MICHAEL R. GORDON**

THE DEBATE over the MX missile will soon reach a crescendo when Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger issues his long-awaited recommendation on how to deploy the 10-warhead missile. For weeks, the press has been feeding on leaks and rumors. Some reports foresee a truncated version of the Carter administration plan to hide some 200 missiles in a maze of 4,600 shelters in Nevada and Utah. Others have Weinberger favoring a plan to place MX missiles aboard mammoth C5A transport planes.

Missing from much of the recent reporting, however, are assessments of how the MX in its various suggested "basing modes" might affect the strategic nuclear balance and the prospects for arms control. *Time* magazine skirted such questions in its recent cover story on the Reagan defense build-up. So did CBS in its five-hour report on "The Defense of the United States."

This is one reason why *MX: Prescription for Disaster* is a timely and important book. Many of the arguments that Herbert Scoville Jr. makes in the book are not new. Scoville's made them before, and his colleague at the Arms Control Association, William H. Kincade, ably presented the strategic case against the MX in an article in *Foreign Policy* over a year and a half ago.

But in the midst of the political controversy over just where to put the MX, arguments over the alleged "destabilizing" features of the missile have faded from public debate. Ironically, this has happened at a time when the Reagan administration has raised fundamental questions about the value of previously negotiated arms-control agreements, injecting more uncertainty into the arms race.

Scoville has studied U.S. and Soviet nuclear weapons for most of his professional life as a scientist for the Atomic Energy Commission, Defense Department official, assistant CIA director, assistant director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and, now, president of the private Arms Control Association. So one cannot lightly dismiss his contention that, far from deterring nuclear conflict, the MX may make nuclear war more likely. Certainly, Scoville's arguments are more compelling than some advanced by some MX critics.

Some critics, for example, have focused on the issue of the accuracy of ICBMs. In a real shooting war, their arguments go, U.S. and Soviet missiles would be subjected to the uncertain magnetic and gravitational properties of the polar region, and neither side could be confident of knocking out the opponent's land-based missile force. And if our land-based Minuteman force is not, for this

One problem with this line of argumentation, from an arms-control perspective, is that it minimizes the destabilizing implications of the MX, which is almost certainly going to be deployed, no matter what some critics

think. If our land-based missiles are not vulnerable to attack, it stands to reason that the MX will not threaten the Soviet land-based nuclear deterrent either. That may be the case. But if Soviet planners believe that their missiles are threatened by the MX, they may, in effect, move their fingers closer to the trigger to protect against the possibility of a preemptive attack.

Another criticism of the MX that could turn out to be counterproductive from the arms-control point of view centers on the environmental consequences of the "shell-game" basing plan. Certainly, in political terms, this has been the most vulnerable feature of the Carter administration's plans for the MX, attracting opposition from groups as diverse as the National Cattlemen's Association and the Mormon Church. But overreliance on this sort of criticism could produce a Pyrrhic victory for arms-control supporters if it results in the deployment of the MX missile in Minuteman silos. Such a move would provide the United States with a first-strike weapon without resolving the vulnerability question.

It's to Scoville's credit that he does not give undue emphasis to these two lines of argument. Scoville's main point is that the vulnerability of land-based missiles is a real concern, even if the actual performance of missiles in a war is uncertain. By deploying 200 MX missiles, he insists, the United States would have enough warheads to threaten the Soviet ICBM force, which carries 70 percent of the Soviet nuclear deterrent, with a first-strike attack. This, he reasons, will impel the Soviet Union to adopt a posture of launch-on-warning of an impending attack, increasing the chances of an accidental nuclear war. Beyond that, he argues, MX missiles may become "flashing beacons" that may draw Soviet fire during an intense crisis.

Clearly, as Scoville sees it, we would be better off to forego the means to threaten Soviet land-based missiles even if they have the capability to threaten ours. As he puts it, "This anomalous situation occurs because only one-third of our deterrent is at stake when ICBMs are vulnerable, while three-fourths of that of the Soviet Union would be at risk. We are not safe when the Soviet leaders think the bulk of their nuclear deterrent is in jeopardy."

If MX missiles must be deployed, he argues, they should be placed on small submarines at sea. Since such submarines would be difficult to target, it would minimize the Soviet incentive to launch a preemptive strike. The United States also could make do with 100 missiles

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